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ABSTRACT

A major concern when encouraging faculty development in teaching composition should be an appeal to faculty pride. Most college English faculty have been conditioned to see the teaching of composition as work for apprentices. The teaching of good writing is not merely strenuous and time-consuming; it demands the best of one's imaginative, mental, and scholarly powers. Perhaps faculty will respond most favorably to scholarly investigation of writing, with appeals to their already existing strengths. English teachers can develop in their colleagues a professional commitment to the teaching of writing by encouraging (1) personal contact, conversations, and exchange of bibliographical notes; (2) exchange lectures in each other's classes when schedules permit; (3) presentations at departmental seminars, inservice meetings, and luncheons; (4) application for program spots at professional meetings; and (5) preparation of articles for the professional journals. None of these includes references to such incentives as raised salaries, extra funds, or recognition for the literary faculty who also write about composition or other incentives. But for important changes and continued growth, there must be an appeal to more conventional scholarly motives. (HTH)

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Encouraging Scholarly Investigation, Striving for Expertness, Collegial Exchanges

A major concern when encouraging faculty development in teaching composition should be an appeal to faculty pride. If a person has earned a Ph.D. in English, has years of service, and has been active at professional meetings, he wants to be thought of as a scholar, ready for challenging teaching assignments, not just a drudge suitable only for routine, lower-level sections. He wants to be respected, not exploited. Most college English faculty have been conditioned somewhat in this fashion during their graduate school days. They have seen the teaching of composition as work for apprentices. They have seen their graduate faculty limiting themselves to lecturing and directing seminars on their special portion of the eighteenth century or their particular interpretation of post-structural theory. From that pattern, it would seem that if one is a good-enough scholar, eventually one would be excused from onerous duties and find one's deserved place in teaching by concentrating with few distractions on reexamination of Puritan morality or Lydgate's saints' legends. All of that, I should think, is easy enough to understand. Participating in an unavoidable composition program, however, because of dubious traditions in the graduate universities, causes complicated feelings about those teaching assignments for many reasons.

This particular audience, at a meeting of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English, probably doesn't need to be told that good, original writing is the supreme test of intellect. The teaching of good writing is not merely strenuous and time-consuming; it demands the best of one's imaginative, mental, and scholarly powers. The bias remains, however, that teaching writing is a lowly task. We seem always ready to entrust such responsibility to our least qualified faculty. If we are to encourage our colleagues in scholarly investigation of writing, we must anticipate

these biases or inhibitions. It should be obvious, at any rate, that scholarly teachers should be as scholarly as they can be in whatever they teach. But scholarly investigation of the writing process, a striving for expertness in the teaching of writing, or collegial exchanges on writing theory are not common experiences for college English teachers, old or young. Such activities need special encouragement. Perhaps faculty will respond most favorably with appeals to their already existing strengths.

A lot of people in departments of English who have done strenuous literary research know very little about recent developments in the teaching of writing; but they have partially compensating strengths and interests which enable them to get by in their composition teaching; but, more important, they have strengths and interests worth building upon:

1. They surely are among the better judges on the faculty of competent writing.
2. They probably are among the better writers also.
3. They may be interested in becoming experts on some aspect of writing theory, on the side.

Our desire is to develop a professional commitment to their teaching of writing corresponding to their commitment to teaching literature. Perhaps they won't become Richard Youngs or Janet Emigs, perhaps not Eleanor Hoffmans or Olivia Freys. But a lot probably can be done. The underdeveloped talents of many English teachers, just going through the motions of teaching writing, can be likened to a buried treasure of inestimable worth. Well, what tools can we use to extricate this unseen treasure?

If you bother to pay close attention to your teaching colleagues, you are likely to find that most of them not only can write fairly well, but may have written something of value (and people usually don't try to conceal such writings).

Or you may find them bragging once in a while about their teaching approaches or successful assignments. In any of this you can probably recognize some aspect of writing in which they excel:

They have graceful style.

They are good at teaching organization.

They know about classical rhetoric.

They bear down on concision.

They encourage imagination.

They like to analyze non-fiction prose.

They know the tricks for cohesiveness.

They seem blessed with originality.

They can evoke humor.

Their students study hard.

Or, on a more practical level:

They have contacts with influential editors.

They are skillful in writing grant proposals.

If you have a colleague who is better than you in any of the preceding, or in other relevant skills or knowledge that I didn't mention, you have a colleague worth looking up to, someone whom you can not only credit, but ought to identify with relative expertness in at least one phase of writing. Even in a very small English department, my guess is there is no one who excels over all others in every aspect of writing. Acknowledging the relative expertness of your colleagues in some area of writing is the first step in developing an esprit de department.

The second step, I suggest, is to ask his advice on that aspect of writing. Let us just assume for the moment that his special strength is organization. Ask him how he teaches organization in his composition class; ask him to come

to your class as a guest lecturer on organization; ask him to prepare a paper on organization for your department seminar or for an all-college in-service meeting. Urge him to apply for a place on the program for next year's MCTE or the CCCC's. But don't let him off too easily; ask his opinion about some of the studies you know of that deal with organization by Kenneth Burke or Ross Winterowd. Maybe he doesn't know them. Duplicate copies of key essays for him; but pester him to keep developing that expertness.

On numerous occasions, while engaged in luring this unsuspecting victim into this trap you have set, as you transform him through such blandishments into a nationally recognized authority on organization, drop hints that you know something too, like how to prevent comma splices--no, that is impossible to imagine. Let us say, instead, that you know a lot about methods of revision, and you even had lunch one time with Nancy Sommers, or, if that seems too grandiose, that you have shaken hands with Donald Murray. Say that your students practice the most sophisticated methods of revision. You can offer to give a guest lecture in his class; you can persuade him to attend your own department seminar on teaching revision. Maybe you can save money by sharing a room when the two of you fly down to New Orleans together to give your papers for the CCCC's next March.

While comparing notes with this fellow on organization and revision, you may also find time to express awe for still another colleague whose students write accurate, informative, carefully documented research papers. How does she do it? You can explain those conventions to your students, threaten them, plead with them, show them good examples, and still not get comparable results. Perhaps the two concerned colleagues should approach her together to encourage her to prepare a more public presentation of her methods. If there are three of you doing significant research and writing on composition, you are well under way.

What I am suggesting in this scenario is an informal method of encouraging scholarly investigation, a striving for expertness, and collegial exchanges. We need to recognize the infinite richness of the field, its centrality in intellectual development, and the necessity of mutual exchanges among serious scholars. Perhaps in some situations a more formal approach would work better. Maybe you actually need a written proposal with assigned responsibilities to be voted on as departmental policy. The essential strategy, I would suggest, no matter how casual or even legalistic, is recognition of expertness in writing. People will strive to excel, and probably will continue to strive, if there is recognition for such striving.

Every kind of scholarship depends upon tolerating a fair amount of loneliness and neglect. To continue to work with enthusiasm and creativity, however, one needs an occasional publication or participation in a professional conference for self-esteem and renewal of interest. But we can help each other more because of common concerns in composition teaching than in other fields if we exert ourselves. Expertness in some field of composition, for most of us, owes nothing to our training in graduate school, but deserves as much attention and respect as having written a dissertation on Sir Thomas Malory or publishing an article on Walter Pater. Chances are your colleagues haven't been as systematic or scholarly or public in their research on writing as they have been on their literary specialties. But the social structure which best encourages productive scholarship in both fields is the same. People can tie their teaching and scholarly investigation together, quite possibly even more consistently in writing about composition than they can with most literary specialties. In summing up, if you will excuse a little repetition, let me review the ways you can encourage departmental pride in developing a more

scholarly investigation of composition:

1. With personal contact, conversations, exchange of bibliographical notes.
2. With exchange lectures in each other's classes, schedules permitting.
3. By inviting and scheduling presentations at departmental seminars, in-service meetings, brown-bag luncheons.
4. By applying for program spots at the MCTE or CCCC's.
5. By preparing articles for the professional journals.

None of this includes reference to such incentives as raised salaries, bonuses for good, transferrable ideas about composition, extra funds for the literary person who also writes about composition, prizes for best essays on teaching writing, or the like. All such inducements, no doubt, would speed up the process while they lasted. But for important changes and continuing growth, there must be an appeal to more conventional scholarly motives. The most important motive, I believe, is scholarly pride.

This presentation was originally given at the 26th Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English at Brainerd, Minnesota, April 20, 1985.